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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 004378

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: STUDENT UNION ELECTIONS: A MICROCOSM OF POLITICS
IN KUWAIT

REF: KUWAIT 4313

11. (SBU) Summary and comment: The Islamic Alliance, a partnership between two student parties affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis, swept Kuwait University's (KU) Student Union elections held in October. The Muslim Brotherhood has dominated the influential Student Union, which represents KU students to the faculty and administration, since 1979. Other political associations in Kuwait also actively support student parties, which are seen as a fertile recruiting ground and a platform for spreading political ideologies. In an October 9 article published in Arabic-language daily Al-Seyassah, Director of the Center for Strategic and Future Studies at KU Dr. Shamlan Al-Essa said the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated student association, the Coalition Group, gains students' support by providing a variety of services to students throughout their university career and even beyond. One faculty member said the 13-member Student Union wields more influence with the administration than the Faculty Association and was influential in pushing a gender separation policy in classrooms. He also said the student groups receive financial support from political associations and/or their wealthy parents. Dr. Ibrahim Hadban, a moderate Islamist political science professor, highlighted the active role played by female students and suggested this indicated women would vote independently in national elections.

12. (SBU) Elections at the university are a microcosm of politics in Kuwait, representing both the major political trends and the reliance of many Municipal Council and National Assembly members on political support derived from providing services to their constituents. In a recent visit to KU, Poloff observed campaign posters from the main student groups plastered all over the campus, attesting to the vibrancy of political debate at the university and Kuwait's potential for an open, democratic political system. Student elections also may also foretell which groups might dominate national elections if the Government implemented major political reforms. (End summary and comment.)

Gender Separation, Women's Rights, and More Cafeteria Space

13. (SBU) Five student parties participated in the recent, hotly-contested elections for Kuwait University's Student Union: the Coalition Group, Islamic Unity, the Free Islamic Movement, the Independent Group, and Democratic Circle. While running separately in college-level elections, two of the parties - the Coalition Group and Islamic Unity, which are affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Traditional Salafis, respectively - partnered in the Student Union election to form the Islamic Alliance and campaigned on the same ticket. The 13-member Student Union represents the university's more than 20,000 students to the faculty and administration and wields considerable influence on campus. The elections are held on a winner-take-all basis: all 13 members of the union come from the winning student group. Election campaigns focus largely on national rather than university issues. In the recent elections, candidates debated over issues ranging from the role of Islam in society to support for women's political rights to the need for more cafeteria space. The Islamic Alliance dominated this year's elections, receiving 5097 votes (3038 female and 2059 male), or 48.4% of the 10526 votes cast. (Note: 5816 females and 4710 males voted in the Student Union elections. End note.)

14. (SBU) Several female members of the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Coalition Group told Poloff they supported gender separation in classes and women's political rights. The group's pamphlets claimed the Islamic Alliance, to which the Coalition Group belongs, represents 50% of KU students. The Coalition Group has won the Student Union elections every year since 1979; many of its former leaders are now active in Kuwait politics.

15. (SBU) The Salafi-affiliated Islamic Unity party espouses moderate Islamic ideology and supports democracy, the group's election pamphlets stated. The pamphlets also highlighted the services provided by the group, which included: "parties, meetings, summits, a student prayer area, a photocopy center,

computer training, and exhibitions."

16. (SBU) Rival student parties represent the political spectrum in Kuwait and are backed by various political movements in the country. The second-largest student party, the Independence Group, is a moderate Islamic party supported by Kuwait's merchant families. Female members of the group told Poloff they supported women's political rights, but opposed gender separation at the university. They also emphasized the need for more cafeteria space on campus. The group's campaign pamphlets highlighted the group's opposition to tribalism and sectarianism, support for equality and cooperation in the Arab world, and belief that "Islam is the way to all our answers." The Independence Group received 2781 votes (26.4% of the total), 1150 female and 1631 male, in the recent elections.

17. (SBU) Female students from the liberal Democratic Circle said they were opposed to gender separation in classes, but supported women's political rights. Election pamphlets highlighted the group's respect for other ideas, its support for equality, freedom, and human rights, and the need for national unity. "Our group's main target is to avoid discrimination and extremism and to treat everyone the same way, regardless of their tribe, religion, or family," the pamphlets stated. The Democratic Circle received 1363 votes (13% of the total), 890 female and 473 male, in the recent elections.

18. (SBU) The Free Islamic Group promotes equal rights for Kuwait's minority Shi'a population and received 1285 votes (12.2% of the total), 738 female and 547 male, in the recent elections.

Bringing the University to Mohammed

19. (SBU) In an October 9 article published in Arabic-language daily Al-Seyassah and entitled, "Why Do They Win," Director of the Center for Strategic and Future Studies at KU Dr. Shamlan Al-Essa argued the Coalition Group's popularity on campus derives from the services it provides to students. In exchange for their votes, the Coalition Group assists students with resolving administrative issues, researching school projects, and even finding internships and post-graduation employment, Al-Essa said. In addition, new students are recruited to join the Coalition Group by members of the Social Reform Society, the charity arm of the Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait, as soon as they enroll in the university. Al-Essa suggested this aggressive strategy was why students who were active in the Student Union "have now become Undersecretaries, Assistant Undersecretaries, National Assembly Members, and senior members of the Islamic Constitutional Movement and Islamic banks."

110. (SBU) "The Student Union has more influence with the administration than the Faculty Association," Vice Dean for Student Affairs and President of the University Faculty Association Dr. Ajeel Al-Zaher told Poloff. He cited as evidence the Student Union's successful push to require separate lecture times for male and female students, which was approved by the National Assembly in 1996 despite the Faculty Association's objections. (Note: The university was given five years to implement the law. According to Al-Zaher, approximately 80% of university courses now have separate lecture times for male and female students. End note.) Al-Zaher also said the student groups receive financial support from political movements in Kuwait and/or their wealthy parents.

111. (SBU) Political Science Professor and columnist Dr. Ibrahim Hadban downplayed the ideological dimension of the Student Union elections in an October 9 meeting. "Today, the student groups are not radically different from each other," he said. "Even Islamist groups, who used to pray piously when they won elections, celebrate loudly with music and food when their candidates are elected," he commented. Student groups are more like "sports teams," he added. Hadban highlighted the active role of female students in the student elections and said he saw this as an indication that women would vote independently in national elections and would not be pressured to vote for particular candidates by their male relatives.

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